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Dale Finn

University of New Haven, dfinn@newhaven.edu

Robin Ammon

University of South Dakota

Kimberly L. Mahoney

University of New Haven, KMahoney@newhaven.edu

Gil Fried

University of New Haven, gfried@newhaven.edu

Khadija Al Arkoubi

University of New Haven, kalarkoubi@newhaven.edu

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Killer Jobs:

The Dark Side of Being a Physical Education Teacher

Dale Finn, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Management
University of New Haven
300 Boston Post Road
West Haven, CT 06516
Phone: 203-932-7093
Fax: 203-931-6007
dfinn@newhaven.edu

Robin Ammon, Ed.D.
Associate Professor - Sport Management
University of South Dakota

Kimberly Mahoney, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Sport Management
University of New Haven

Gil Fried, J.D.
Chair and Professor of Sport Management
University of New Haven

Khadija Al Arkoubi, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor of Management
University of New Haven

Killer Jobs:
The Dark Side of Being a Physical Education Teacher

Abstract

The profession of physical education (PE) teacher involves a variety of risks. Most PE teachers or future teachers are aware of the risks associated with their students becoming injured. Sport law classes often discuss negligence, risk management, proper supervision, suitable equipment, appropriate instruction, proper matching of opponents, etc. The focus is primarily or exclusively on student safety. Rarely is the focus on the risks PE teachers face themselves. This article discusses the largely neglected topics of transportation, workplace violence, and slip/trip and falls, all of which are occupational hazards for PE teachers, potentially associated with serious injuries or death.

Key Words: Physical education teachers, PE teachers, occupational hazards, transportation, 15-passenger van, workplace violence, school violence, slip/trip and falls

Numerous students dream of an exciting career as a physical education (PE) teacher. Many PE teachers (estimated to be around 201,000 in 2011-12) enjoy the profession they chose. However, this particular profession is not without risks. Most PE teachers or future teachers are aware of the risks associated with their students becoming injured. Sport law classes often discuss negligence (duty and breach of duty as examples), risk management, proper supervision, suitable equipment, appropriate instruction, proper matching of opponents, etc., but rarely do instructors, mentors, or colleagues focus on the risks PE teachers face. We are not talking about the risk of a pulled muscle or a bruise from slipping or falling while instructing. We are talking about severe injuries or death. PE teachers face a number of work related injuries that can be very serious. These injuries can include: colliding with students while playing a sport or demonstrating an activity, injuring one's back while moving heavy equipment; tripping while carrying large equipment; exposure to bloodborne pathogens while treating a bleeding student, or suffering an injury breaking up a fight.

The focus of this article is on workplace injuries and how they can affect PE teachers. We will explore some of the underlying trends associated with injuries to PE teachers. The primary concerns we will address include transportation, workplace violence, and slip/trip and falls. Then we will provide some strategies to address these concerns. It should be noted from the beginning that numerous teachers, coaches, and other school workers are exposed to similar risks/injuries, but the authors feel that little attention has been paid to PE teachers and the unique active environment in which they are engaged.

Underlying Trends

The most common workplace injuries are aches and pains. Many PE teachers suffer from such symptoms whether it is a sore back, aching or pulled muscles, or stiff/tender joints. The

routine care to handle such injuries costs all industries over \$61 billion annually (Fried, 2011).

This does not include the lost productivity associated with workers not being able to effectively do their jobs. In 2008 employees in the sport industry experienced 41.3% more strains than in the average workplace.

O'Dell (2009) estimated that over 9 million employees in the American workplace suffer disabling injuries from slip and falls. This number equated to approximately 25,000 such injuries every day, the most severe resulting in paraplegia and quadriplegia. These types of injuries can result from everyday injuries to teachers such as slipping on a water puddle next to a drinking fountain.

The following statistics pertain to sports in general but provide a context for understanding the sheer volume of workplace fatalities in the United States. In 2010 there were 4,547 workplace fatalities (Fried, 2011). The percentage break down of these deaths includes:

Highway or other traffic related	21%
Fall same level and down to another level	14%
Workplace violence/homicides	11%

Five percent (229) of all fatalities affected the nearly two million employees in the leisure, hospitality and sport industry.

Transportation

When someone thinks about workplace injuries they rarely think about transportation-related injuries. However, PE teachers and coaches travel to attend events, purchase supplies, deliver items, attend conferences, scout opponents, participate in off-campus meetings, plus a variety of other on-the-job duties. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), from 2001 to 2010 there were 363,839 fatal motor vehicle crashes and

of those, 1,236 were classified as school transportation-related with an average of 137 fatalities per year (NHTSA, 2012). A more recent example is an accident in which the Seton Hall University (PA) women's lacrosse coach, her unborn child and the driver were killed when their bus ran off the road. The coach and team were travelling to an afternoon game with Millersville University (McGill, 2013).

Such accidents could happen at any time, but there is extra risk involved when the vehicle used is a 15-passenger van. The design of a 15 passenger van makes it fundamentally unstable. A fully loaded or nearly loaded 15-passenger van is 3 times more likely to roll over than a van with less than 5 passengers (Bello, 2011). The instability can be made worse by a blowout caused by tire deterioration, improper weight distribution, overloading, and driver handling.

The high number of 15-passenger van accidents every year shows how frequently accidents impact not just students, but also teachers, chaperones, and coaches. According to the NHTSA (2009), in 2007 there were 45 fatalities in 15-passenger vans that rolled over, which was 73% more than in 2006. In addition, approximately one-fourth of fatally injured occupants of 15-passenger vans during the five years of their study, were drivers (NHTSA, 2009). In the instance of school transportation, those drivers may be teachers, coaches or administrators. In 2008, *60 Minutes II* reported on the dangers of 15-passenger vans and in the months following the show, two insurers used by churches and schools opted to no longer insure the vans and several universities instituted policies prohibiting their athletes from being transported in the vans (Kohn, 2009). Despite the evidence of dangers associated with these 15-passenger vans, they continue to be a widespread method of transportation for schools at all levels, sometimes resulting in fatalities.

For example, in a 2008 accident two people were killed and at least 15 people, including 12 members of the San Manuel (AZ) High School's cheerleading squad, were injured in a three-vehicle crash. The squad was en route to a football game when the driver of their 15-passenger van swerved to avoid a dog on an interstate highway and lost control of the vehicle (Younger, 2008). A collision between a tractor-trailer and a 15-passenger van carrying Navarro College (TX) student-athletes left 2 players dead in 2004. A student assistant was the driver of the van and according to police was responsible for the accident (Wixon, 2006).

Additionally, PE teachers occasionally find it necessary to drive small carts to move equipment or set up playing fields. Driving those carts poses another source of risk. One of the more common causes of sport-related transportation injuries arises when maintenance vehicles and lawn mowers tip over (Fried, 2012). In a study of golf course employee deaths from 2001-2006, 106 employees had died with the most common causes of death being overturned vehicles (19 fatalities) and other non-highway accidents (14).

School Violence

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Center for the Prevention of School Violence has defined school violence as "any behavior that violates a school's education mission or climate of respect and jeopardizes the intent of the school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder" (2002, para 3, cited in Espelage et al., 2013). According to Dzukat and Dalbert (2007), violence against teachers includes: (1) harmful verbal behavior, (2) harmful physical behavior, (3) damage to personal property, (4) social coercion, (5) manipulative behavior aimed at socially isolating the victim. Examples of these behaviors include hate crimes, racism acts, insults, racial profiling, physical assault, and any kind of harassment.

School violence is a critical and multidimensional problem that is leading to a national crisis. The Sandy Hook school incident that occurred in Newtown, CT in December, 2012 shocked the entire country. In 2011, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics released a report entitled "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010." The report showed that in the course of a single school year 145,100 public school teachers had been physically attacked by students at their schools. Another 276,700 public school teachers had been threatened with injury by a student during the same school year. The DOE's "School and Staffing Survey" conducted after the 2011-2012 school year indicated that 10 percent of public school teachers had been physically threatened and 5.8 percent had been physically attacked. In contrast, 3.1 percent of private school teachers had been threatened and 2.7 percent had been physically assaulted by students. The results showed that urban teachers and female teachers were more likely to be assaulted (Jeffrey, 2011). The DOE component of the survey indicated that the 127,120 (4 percent) of public school teachers (K-12) who were physically attacked at school had to endure being hit, kicked, bitten, slapped, stabbed or shot (Simpson, 2011).

PE teachers are not immune to this violence. In 2012 the parent of an 8-year old basketball player assaulted his son's coach, who was also the PE teacher, in the school's main hallway. The parent was upset at the coach for yelling at his son during a game (Clines, 2012). During the same year a PE teacher in New York was assaulted by two high school students who were confronted by the teacher for eating in the gym. One student punched the teacher in the face and the other tried to hold the teacher's legs (Squire, 2012). In 2010, a student threatened to kill and attempted to hit his physical education teacher at Olney High School East in Philadelphia

when the teacher tried to get the student to sit down during a health class (Snyder, Graham, Sullivan & Purcell, 2011).

Many scholars agree that violence has been prevalent in the 21st century educational setting and that its impact on the physical and emotional health of both teachers and students is substantial (McMahon, et al., 2013; Espelage & DeLarue, 2011). Teachers report anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms that affect their ability to perform well in the classroom and negatively influence their general well-being (Wilson, Douglas & Lyon, 2011). Furthermore, teachers who are not well prepared to cope with violence may show dissatisfaction and less commitment toward their profession (Klassen & Chiu, 2011).

Slip/Trip and Falls

Slip/trip and fall injuries can happen anywhere, but are extremely common in the workplace. These occurrences result in a variety of problems such as broken bones, back injuries, or chronic pain. Logic dictates that slips and falls occur with older employees, but according to the NIOSH “slips and falls are the leading cause of workers’ compensation claims and are the leading cause of occupational injury for people age 15-24 years”. Although younger employees are affected, one cannot ignore the aging US workforce; the number of falls and injuries are likely to increase as a result of the aging population (NIOSH, 2013).

One of the most common injuries faced by PE teachers is the slip and fall, which can occur in hallways, gyms, and locker rooms, in physical education classes and at sports events. A British study found that 55% of all health and safety-related accidents in education are caused by a slip or a trip and 90% of those accidents resulted in a broken bone. For example, a PE teacher slipped on a floor that had been recently mopped and broke her arm (Health and Safety Executive, n.d.). In New York a physical education teacher fell and herniated a disk in his back.

The fall was a result of water from a water fountain that had been spraying too high for a number of years. Despite previous complaints the school administration had failed to repair it (Jury Verdict Review, 2013).

Cox v McKernan (2013) involved a female physical education teacher who suffered a broken forearm after falling on a slippery gymnasium floor. The injury occurred in 1993, but final judgment didn't occur until May 2013. McKernan and other PE teachers had complained about the condition of the floor to school administrators to no avail. The plaintiff testified the floor was "very, very slippery from a certain wax that they had put on." She also stated that the floor was "so slippery" that "the kids were always slipping all over the place," such that the basketball coaches "had to use water and a mop just to dry certain areas" (*Cox v McKernan*, 2013).

Accidents resulting while operating equipment can't be ignored. PE teachers are responsible for erecting volleyball nets, putting down the basketball hoops, moving dumbbells and weights and carrying smaller pieces of equipment such as balls and bats. One such incident in 2011 involved a physical education teacher in Arizona who fell from a lift after reconnecting a speaker located in the school's gymnasium. The lift was descending when it became unstable causing the teacher to fall 20 feet resulting in a fractured leg and broken jaw (Wittig, 2011).

Prevention Strategies

After teachers are aware of possible dangers in the gym and playing fields they should learn strategies to manage, avoid or eliminate these potentially dangerous issues.

Transportation

Relative to the transportation issues discussed previously, several strategies should be employed to ensure the safety of students and teachers alike. If at all possible teachers should

avoid using 15-passenger vans to transport their students. A teacher might even be able to influence school policy by providing relevant statistics to an administrator or school board member. The use of school busses and professionally trained drivers is the best case scenario. If financial or logistic limitations prevent this option, certain steps should be taken:

1. The teacher should ensure that the vehicle has been properly maintained. This includes up-to-date state inspection stickers, properly inflated tires and a fully equipped first aid kit.
2. Never overload the vehicle.
3. Confirm that the passenger and cargo weight is appropriately distributed. West Bend Mutual Insurance Company (2011) has provided an excellent instructional video on the topic.
4. Require everyone in the vehicle to wear a seat belt at all times. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, over the past decade 80% of the people who died as a result of a 15-passenger rollover were *not* wearing seat belts (Bello, 2011).
5. Even if a school bus is not available, use experienced drivers when possible and ensure they have driver training specific to a 15-passenger van.
6. Instruct the driver to maintain a speed that is safe for the conditions. During inclement conditions this may be less than the posted speed limit. A 15-passenger van does not respond well to panic maneuvers.

School Violence

Media scrutiny becomes intense when shootings take place in a school setting such as Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School. Although such extreme incidents rarely occur, PE teachers are sometimes faced with verbal threat and physical assaults.

Establishing a climate of safety is critical to preventing school violence. School administrators should collaborate with staff, teachers, students, parents and the community to reach an agreement regarding specific strategies for fostering a culture of safety, respect and care. Such an environment has been found to be a catalyst for a reduced level of victimization among both teachers and students. (O'Brennan & Bradshaw, n.d.). The National Association of School Psychologists has developed guidelines for reinforcing the fact that schools are safe environments in order to make both students and adults feel safer while at school (NASP, 2006).

It is critical for the PE faculty to devise clear and specific policies that explicitly explain how to deal with and respond to different violence situations. These policies must clearly state the appropriate response to be utilized by not only the victim but the other PE faculty as well. Lockdown and evacuation procedures for different types of crises should be established and practiced. This is vital for situations such as an active shooter or when faced with a student possessing a weapon.

A second prevention strategy is the design and implementation of training programs for PE students that focus on violence prevention. These programs can help curtail aggressive behaviors (Espelage & DeLarue, 2011). PE teachers must clearly define the consequences if violence does occur on the field, in the gymnasium or locker room. After receiving this information students sign pledge cards acknowledging their intent to abide by the policies and the penalties if they don't. However, PE teachers must appreciate the age appropriateness of the policies they implement. Positive choices and accepting responsibility for one's own actions must be continually emphasized no matter the age group.

At another level, using a developmental approach as an intervention strategy could be effective. Infusing violence prevention content throughout the physical education curriculum

allows both students and faculty to become more aware of the risks and prepare both groups to better respond to any behavioral issues that may result in violence. PE teachers, like managers in any business environment, must be trained on how to recognize signs of potential violence, such as frequent absences, depression, extreme stress, domestic violence, and so forth (Patterson & Leadbetter, 2002). Though not related specifically to incidents in physical education, Klebold & Harris at Columbine High School, Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech University, and Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook Elementary School all had exhibited behavioral problems before embarking on their murder sprees. Therefore, educating those involved in physical education programs on how to recognize these signs of potential violence is essential.

Slip /Trip and Fall Injuries

PE teachers are the first line of defense to prevent a slip/trip and fall injury to themselves or students. They should inspect facilities on a regular and systematic basis to ensure that no hazards are present. Through personal observation and experience the authors suggest ten tips that will help reduce the number of slip/trip and fall injuries that may occur in a physical education setting:

1. Slippery, dusty or floors with uneven surfaces must be eliminated.
2. Proper footwear must be worn at all times.
3. Equipment such as balls, rackets, bats, jump ropes, cones, pennies etc. must be picked up and stored in an appropriate equipment closet, locker room or storage area.
4. Electrical cords leading to machines or equipment must be covered or routed to areas free of foot traffic.
5. Any type of weight plates must be racked properly.

6. Water tracked from swimming pools or locker room showers must be mopped up in a timely fashion.
7. Leaks from water fountains or roofs must be eliminated.
8. All equipment must be cleaned of any sweat or water bottle spills.
9. Trash must be disposed in an appropriate manner.
10. Activity surfaces must be adequately maintained (i.e. repair loose tiles, use skid resistant carpeting, employ appropriate cleaning materials for wood surfaces, sweep floors after each activity and fill all divots and holes in grass fields).

It is vital that these potential problems be corrected before any activity resumes.

Custodians and school maintenance personnel must be made aware of any significant problem as soon as it is discovered so that it can be corrected promptly.

Conclusion

This article was written to inform PE teachers of the need to be vigilant for their own safety. There are numerous workplace hazards including vehicular accidents while transporting students or equipment, becoming injured as a result of facility design flaws, and workplace violence. These are only some of the concerns a PE teacher can face, but vigilant teachers, colleagues, and administrators can help make the workplace safer for everyone. No PE teacher wants to see a minor problem become a major one or a major problem become catastrophic.

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